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'Flexibility works both ways': Bristol's zero-hours lifestyles

F. H. Pitts – 27th January 2016

Could zero-hours contracts be managed by workers?

Zero-hours contracts (ZHCs) are agreements between employers and employees guaranteeing no fixed hours. At 2.8 per cent of all contracts, the southwest has the third-highest proportion of ZHCs in the UK. The *Cable* has surveyed zero-hours workers in Bristol. Their stories suggest experiences of ZHCs are very context-dependent – flexibility can be enjoyed or endured depending on circumstances. For every person freed from nine-to-five drudgery, another faces insecurity and uncertainty.

Most who give feedback feel insecure in their employment. The greatest source of ongoing uncertainty is hours chopping and changing. Legislation around ZHCs makes no provision regarding the timeframe for notifying workers of their hours. While the government sought highly criticised regulation for ZHCs, the Labour Party and trade unions seek to abolish them.

Nearly everyone we speak to reports regular short-notice cuts in hours. (For some, this has effectively meant sacking by stealth.) Very few people intend or expect to remain in the job for long; most for less than six months.

Like it or don't

While precarious, ZHCs' flexibility can support lifestyle choices such as travel or activism. They provide low-commitment, easily escapable work, and can enable stability between more rewarding project-based jobs. One Easton resident, a musician, can reduce her hours to dovetail with summer festivals. Students tell us they can "slim down" or cancel hours completely to accommodate academic commitments.

One waitress living in Bishopston takes regular time off for gigging with her band. But "flexibility works both ways", she says: the job's flexibility often excludes it elsewhere. Far from facilitating them, ZHCs can also stop workers pursuing desired lifestyles. Frequent evening shifts for bar staff can prevent involvement in sports or courses, for example. Similarly, weekend hours obstruct a 'normal' social life. One employee receives her weekly rota late Sunday. "I find out what I'm working Monday morning 12 hours beforehand," she says.

However liberating, zero-hours contracts cannot escape the social context from which they spring: one of inequality between employees and employers

That said, while criticisms of ZHCs often imply the desirability of the traditional nine-to-five, this perception isn't necessarily reflected in the feelings of those employed on ZHCs. National statistics suggest two-thirds of workers on ZHCs have no desire to work more hours. They are either happy with their lot, or want to work less. In line with this, around two-thirds of those surveyed are happy with their hours. The happiest are those who use ZHCs to support study, music or writing. Their concerns relate little to regularly working too many or too few hours. Rather, they challenge the unpredictability of those hours.

Employee-led rota making?

On paper, a ZHC enables a worker to refuse work, just as it does the boss to withhold it. But however liberating, ZHCs cannot escape the social context from which they spring: one of inequality between employees and employers. The former have little legal or political weight with which to hold the latter to account. Trade union membership is almost non-existent. Zero-hours workers seldom have a right to legal redress.

The positive experiences of some Bristolians recommend alternatives. A café worker from St George suggests workers could negotiate hours in a fair way. This would, she says, "enable us all to be happy with our hours and maintain lives outside of work". Her alternative would put ZHCs under the democratic control of workers. It would overturn the unequal power relationship that puts flexibility in the palms of managers.

The freelance and creative lifestyles sustained by ZHC workers in Bristol hint at their potential. But for ZHCs to offer real freedom and flexibility to workers, work must be organised differently. With a worker calling out "bullying" and suggesting "sack the management", could zero-hours staff seize control of the distribution

of hours? Could they collectively allocate hours based upon need or ability? Bristol's growing co-operative movement could provide a template.

Restructuring the relationship between employees and employers may unleash ZHCs' full potential. Harnessed the right way, they could free workers from being "abused by awful employers to keep their employees subdued", as one respondent puts it. They could invite other ways of living and relating to paid employment.

It's like a race to the bottom

'In my experience, zero-hours contracts are totally rubbish, almost always benefiting just the employer. In theory they sound great: your employer offers you a range of hours and days, you pick and choose what fits in with your availability and the number of hours you want/need to work that week. But I think the reality is quite different. [...] I'm extremely cautious about doing this, because I fear that if I am seen as not obedient or flexible enough, my hours would suddenly drop, as a kind of punishment, or because I'm replaceable, or because the other staff are more flexible and obedient. This would be completely legal because my employer has no legal requirement to offer me work under a zero-hours contract.'

I think all the other employees probably have this as well – there's only a certain amount of hours each week to go around. It's like a race to the bottom, who can perform the best and comply the most and put up with the most shit, not to progress, but to not lose hours. And we're all reliant on the work because it's minimum wage so we're all mostly living a hand-to-mouth existence anyway and can't afford to suddenly be jobless or cut down to 10 hours a week. Overall, I have had no positive experiences with zero-hours contracts.'

– Café worker, St George